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# Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective (Book Review)

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*Christ and Violence*, by Ronald J. Sider. Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1979. 102 pages. Reviewed by John R. Visser, Instructor in Business Administration and Economics.

Because of the increasing discussions about military readiness and major spending increases for national defense, at least in the U.S., the book *Christ and Violence* is timely, to say the least. A book of fewer than 100 pages, it can be read in a few hours with no difficulty. The book is divided into four chapters, entitled "The Cross and Violence," "Christ and Power," "Peacemaking and Economics," and "Walking in the Resurrection in a Violent World," each of which is followed by five or six discussion questions. Because of this format the book might be conveniently studied by church, Bible study, or prayer groups.

The first chapter develops the theme that God has called his people to live out the vision of the *Jubilee* in a manner which is described as the way of "suffering servanthood." The author points to the resurrection as the final triumph over violence and develops the theme of suffering as "calling" based largely on the sermon on the mount and I Peter 2:20-21.

In the second section Sider announces his intention "to argue . . . that the use of economic and political power may be, indeed is, fully compatible with the way of the cross as outlined in chapter one." He attempts to distinguish between forms of coercion which "love and respect the other person as a free moral agent, responsible to the Creator" and those which do not. He points out the difference between being "subject to" authority and blind obedience to it, and further states that "not to take the offensive against the (principalities and) powers is to ignore the whole thrust of God's action in history."

In chapter three the author applies his theme to economic structures which he says can "destroy people by the millions." At the beginning of the chapter he looks at Biblical teachings with respect to institutional violence, while later on he focuses on how North American Christians are necessarily implicated and what they can do about it. He particularly pushes for a distinctively Christian life style in which the church must recapture the early churches "powerful experience of community in Christ's Body." He adds that "It is a farce to ask Washington to legislate what the church refuses to live."

Chapter four is a summary of the previous three chapters coupled with a call for action. Sider dreams "of a time when thousands and thousands of congregations . . . have been transformed from comfortable clubs largely conformed to surrounding society's materialism into radical beachheads of the coming kingdom" and when churches will "find new ways to witness to the militaristic madness of modern society."

All in all, the book *Christ and Violence* is an interesting book, well worth the time it takes to read it. However, it often seems as though the author is trying to say too much too quickly, and because of this the reader is left with the impression that certain of the author's conclusions have been more thoroughly researched and supported than others. He briefly mentions subjects from nuclear energy to refusing to pay "war taxes" with little or no explanation. The author, however, does not pretend to present an in-depth study of all the subjects touched upon in the book, but rather only to address an important subject and raise penetrating questions with respect to a topic that should be of considerable interest to Christians everywhere during the 1980's. To that degree he has succeeded, and thus the reading of the book *Christ and Violence* might be a good starting place for Christians serious about confronting an issue which has for too long been sidestepped by the mainstream of the Christian community.

*Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective*, by Leland Ryken. Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1979. 260 pages. Reviewed by Randall VanderMey, Instructor in English.

Christian readers and writers of literature, including those of a Kuyperian stripe, will find plenty to applaud in these pages. Ryken, a professor of English at Wheaton College whose critical essays have often appeared in *Christianity Today*, rejects *pro forma* the humanist tendency to grant literary art the status of religion but focuses more heavily on the chronic underestimation of literature in the Christian church, school, and community.

Ryken's case for literature is no new set of proofs or insights but instead a reminder that the greatest Christian apologists for literature, many of them outstanding as both writers and critics, insist together that literature has functions uniquely its own. It may teach, but that in isolation would be its paltriest accomplishment. Its highest claim is to be able to teach and delight in the same operation by a marriage between aesthetically pleasing form and imaginative vision of reality which is prophetic and not bound by the aims or methods of the scientific, philosophical, or theological disciplines. This, of course, is a view first and most sweetly enunciated by Sir Philip Sidney in his "Apology for Poetry" (c. 1580) and built upon by T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, and others in modern arguments for a Christian aesthetic. Speaking from the chorus, Ryken recognizes Sidney as the precedent-setter,

strongly seconding his appeal to the Bible as the chief sourcebook for models of literary form and postulates of criticism. "I would claim without hesitation," Ryken writes, "that even today Sidney's treatise contains in kernel form all that is required as a foundation for a Christian aesthetic" (p. 220).

Upon that foundation, the author discusses Christian perspectives on a number of major variables in literary transactions—beauty, imagination, world-view, the role of critics, readers and writers, and the exemplariness of the Bible. His discussion, a broad and allusive (though, it must be confessed, superficial) survey, is unified by the following emphases.

First, Ryken argues that the Christian is not only permitted but, in fact, obliged to seek and appreciate beauty, including the beauty of literary forms, in the world. This obligation is ours only because God, the author of all beauty, endowed man with creativity after His own image and because the Fall, though it corrupted man's artistic perceptions and aims, did not entirely obscure his artistic nature. Thus Christians may contemplate beauty that redounds to the glory of God even in the works of non-Christians, where it can be found by the miracle of common grace. Christian readers, in short, may not bury their heads in doctrinal sands. Conversely, Ryken denies that Christian literature is better *qua* art simply because of its Christian content. But he cautions: "Neither do I think that there is such a thing as a purely artistic response to literature. Ultimately, my fullest appreciation goes to literature that pleases me not only by its imaginative beauty but also by its truth" (p. 150).

Second, Ryken consistently refers to the appreciation of beauty as a "recreational use" proper to all full appreciation of literature. He rebukes theorists such as Nathan Scott (*The New Orpheus*) and Amos Wilder (*Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition*) for ignoring the pure "fun" of reading and trying to put literature always to a "solemnly theological" use. Ryken himself, however, never defines the significant differences between the literary critic, the meta-critic, and the literary connoisseur. Nor does he pause anywhere to distinguish between reading "fun" that is hedonistic and reading fun that is celebratory, a Christian's sharing in God's eternal self-satisfaction.

Third, this book, in design and theme, urges the Christian community to embrace the Christian writers and critics in its midst:

> Christian writers today deserve the support of the Christian church in a way they do not come close to receiving. . . . The time has come to hear the voice of the Christian writer in the worship service, in the sermon or in the small group meeting. The believing community portrayed throughout the Bible did not, we must remember, distrust the storyteller and poet. Neither should the Christian church today (p. 173).

Finally, Ryken faults most other attempts to formulate a Christian literary aesthetic for failure on two counts: most neither found their insights in specific references to Scripture nor show how their principles would apply in critiques of actual literary texts. Ryken attempts to do both, particularly in model explications of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The appeal to Scripture for formal models, archetypes, and critical principles, he insists, does not narrow the field of literary criticism, as some would object, but, on the contrary, sets it upon its broadest possible foundation.

Many teachers will approach this book optimistically, wanting a key to help their students formulate their own literary aesthetics. They may like what they see at first. Ryken is obviously a sincere Christian in outlook, Reformed in character and doctrine, widely read, a holder of strong and healthy opinions, a writer of clear prose, and a practitioner of what he preaches. Here he has sought a golden mean, reformulating, in outline, a compellingly genial apology with the classical as well as the Christian stamp upon it.

For the unseasoned theorist, nevertheless, this book is a minefield. And for the alert, more experienced critic, much of it may seem naively, misguidedly simplistic, an anachronism and an embarrassment.

Though this book was published in 1979, its critical temper is one which last prevailed about 20 years ago when American formalists like John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and others—the school of so-called New Critics—were at the height of their influence. Ryken nowhere acknowledges that many basic premises of New Criticism have been undercut in the last two decades by a more radical formalism, emerging from Europe, called structuralism. Nor does he even gesture toward the more troubling propositions of post-structuralist philosopher-critics such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and in this country Paul DeMan, J. Hillis Miller, and to an extent, Harold Bloom. Alongside these movements, literary criticism has fermented over such problems as the phenomenology of reading, hermeneutics, genre theory, critical pluralism, and ideology, all with direct or indirect bearing on questions Ryken wants to address. But mum's the word. When New Critical methodology proves inadequate, as when Ryken discusses the world of the literary imagination in Chapter 3, he turns trustingly—one might say, obsequiously—to the criticism of Northrop Frye, who has organized major literary archetypes into a "monomyth," the "one great story" of literature. Ryken casually suggests that the monomyth can be found delineated in the Bible; but Frye would not be subverted so easily—he puts the Bible within the monomyth, implicitly denying its claim to be divinely revealed, though always attesting to its greatness as literature. Frye and Ryken can bed together only as long as Ryken wears blinkers.

I could list, as well, a string of statements, not the

weight-bearing sort, whose weak premises peer out at the reader like gargoyles. Let me offer a couple of samples, to show the tendency. "An education is complete and generous," the author states, "when . . . it equips people to . . . adorn the mansion of their mind and imagination with noble furnishings" (p. 32). Elsewhere, one finds: "And to define the truth of literature in terms of emotion, while it may help us to understand lyric poetry . . . "—stop. No predicate, however lucid, could rescue that sentence.

Quibbles and cautions aside, however, *Triumphs of the Imagination* deserves attention as a book with a strong, healthy thesis, an ambitious and instructive design, and a vigorous, plain style. Its faults as well as its strengths may serve to foster dialogue about literature among Christians in church and school.

*Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources*, edited by Loren Wilkinson. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980. 317 pages, paper, $10.95. Reviewed by Russell Maatman, Professor of Chemistry.

This book is essential reading for anyone interested in discussing the role of modern science and technology in our society. It is a Christian analysis of the current situation with respect to stewardship of the earth. It presents a position which in the main ought to be the position of all Christians. At a time when many books on "science and the environment" are appearing, many of them by Christians, it is difficult to produce one more book which actually adds to what has been said. But *Earthkeeping* is just such a book.

First, a word about the origin of the book. Its seven authors—Peter De Vos, Calvin De Witt, Eugene Dykema, Vernon Ehlers, Derk Pereboom, Aileen Van Beilen, and Loren Wilkinson—were fellows of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship in Grand Rapids, Michigan, during the 1977-78 academic year. They studied stewardship of natural resources and this book is part of the fruit of their effort. One might expect that such a book would have seven chapters, one from each author. Instead, the chapters are not ascribed to authors, although it is obvious from the wide range of subjects covered that there are several authors. Even so, the unity of the book is fully as good as it is in books with but one author. Editor Wilkinson is to be commended for very fine writing: the book is clear and there is an easy flow of ideas from one chapter to the next.

The book contains four sections. The first describes the current state of the earth with respect to land use, distribution of wealth, population distribution, etc. There are two parts to the second section. The first is a lucid history of philosophical ideas, presented so that the reader can understand the origin of present ideas concerning the environment. The second part of this section is complementary, relating philosophy to modern economics and technology. The third section is basically theological, providing the biblical perspective on stewardship of the earth. The fourth section consists of suggestions of what we might do to become better stewards and it contains a scenario of what our earth might be like in the year 2025 if we actually accept these suggestions.

Relative to the current discussion on conservation, the book takes a position which at first seems more like that of the environmentalists than of their opponents. But the position of this book is fundamentally different from that of either of those groups. That is, this book presents a position which neither submerges man in nature (the extreme environmentalist view which tends toward pantheism) nor improperly centers on man as an exploiter (the position of the extreme anti-environmentalist). All of creation is to be respected because it is a creation of God. Man's place in creation is that of a keeper, a steward. He is to use it only in that context. Thus Christians should not disagree with the book's approach, even though at times they may question some of the positions taken. Although I now shall raise a few of these questions, nothing I say here should be taken to mean that this book is anything less than an extremely important book which will surely point the way for Christians for many years.

The first section is an excellent source of data on land usage, food consumption, population distribution and growth, energy production, natural resources, and wealth distribution. I wonder, however, if using the very great contrast between the gross national product of rich nations and that of poor nations (pp. 76-78) does not prove too much. Obviously, some nations are rich and some are poor. To put it another way, the people of some nations are overfed and those of other nations are undernourished. But the gross national product measuring stick (is not this also true of other measuring sticks, such as energy consumption?) is a measuring stick invented by and suited for industrialized nations, and is probably not appropriate when analyzing non-industrial lifestyles.

The first part of the second section consists of one of the clearest discussions of the history of ideas I have ever seen. In addition, it is refreshing to find an explanation of the adoption of the Copernican view (which replaced the Ptolemaic view) (pp. 125ff.) that focusses on the philosophical issue involved rather than on the controversy within the Roman Catholic Church. On another matter, this book seems to differ with R. Hooykaas on the role that Greek attitudes toward nature played in the history of science (see R. Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Eerdmans, 1972), chapter 3). Hooykaas claims one attitude, which held that nature could not be imitated,